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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problems involved in the screening and retention of students in human service education. A review of the goals of these screening and retention processes is presented along with the identification and exploration of internal and external program variables affecting them. The open admissions policy of many institutions which may confound the screening process is discussed and informal processes which can effectively retain students with potential and discourage students with unlikely potential are presented. Admission requirements to the Pan American University Human Service Program are enumerated and the methods used to evaluate student progress toward specific course objectives in academic and professional-social areas are discussed along with the policies regarding student dismissal. This paper concludes that, by emphasizing the retention process, a more positive approach to facilitating academic and professional student growth will occur and most graduates will become effective human service helpers and managers. (Author/NRB)

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SCREENING, RETAINING AND COUNSELING HUMAN SERVICE STUDENTS

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Screening, Retaining and Counseling Human Service Students

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Screening, retaining and counseling each represent extremely important, yet sometimes vaguely specified processes which contribute greatly to the production of competent human service providers and managers. In each instance, human service educators are charged with the responsibility of selecting and retaining those students that show good potential for contribution, and screening out and discouraging those students that show poor potential. A brief descriptive analysis of the problems involved may more clearly provide a basis for organizing thoughts regarding these two processes, and ultimately in developing more effective methods of attaining the goals of the processes.

Screening, within the current context, is defined as the initial process of selecting and admitting students into a program with the goal of maximizing the ratio of good potential students to poor potential students. Figure 1 graphically illustrates this process, along with describing potential outcomes of various methodologies. Without going into detail, the objective is to maximize "B + C" and minimize "A + D". Ideally, methodologies must be developed which correlate with these goals.

At many institutions, the open admissions policy may confound the screening process. At Pan American University, the institution has an open admissions policy; however, each academic program within the University may establish its own admissions procedure. In the Pan American University Human Service Program, admission to the program occurs prior to enrollment in sophomore level agency practicum courses. Relevant admissions requirements which must be met include: (1) satisfactory completion (minimum of "C") of University-designated deficiency area coursework in speech and English; (2) successful completion of freshman English requirements; and (3) completion of at least one freshman human service course requiring a self-development counseling lab; and, (4) a degree plan filed with the Human Service Program and approved by the Program Coordinator.

These requirements serve several basic functions which enhance the likelihood of screening in students with good potential. Requiring documentation of coursework in speech (if indicated) and English increases the likelihood that students beginning agency practica will have basic verbal and written communication skills.

Completion of a mandatory 15 week counseling lab as a client in individual or group sessions helps address the area of personal-social potential. These sessions are conducted by the Counseling and Guidance Center Staff at the University. This self-development experience is a method of emphasizing the need for personal-social growth and effective personal problem-solving skills. Human Service faculty take no active part in the screening which this method produces. Personal decisions are made by potential students and their counselors. And finally, filing a degree plan involves an interview with the Program Coordinator which provides an opportunity for a written and verbal information exchange, and clarification in the area of expectations, both student and programmatic.

Both due to the open admissions policy and to the difficulty in accurately measuring and predicting what "good potential" is, the Pan American University Human Service Program is involved in screening only to a moderate degree. Research in the late 1960's by Carkhuff and subsequently by Ivey have suggested certain helper characteristics or skills related to communication which appear closely related to therapeutic effectiveness. Methods for measuring these characteristics have been developed and validated, such that they could be used as screening methods. Another, less well known procedure was developed by Goodman (1972) at the University of California at Los Angeles called the Group Assessment for Interpersonal Traits (GAIT). The GAIT format and can involve peer and faculty ratings. This method will be discussed in more detail later. However, when such a method is used for screening purposes, the likelihood of a quadrant D (see Figure 1) error would presumably increase. At the Pan American University Program, the assumption is made that these helper characteristics can be learned, and as such, this type of screening method is not worth the potential cost it would likely incur. As a sidenote, this assumption is consistent with concept of competence proposed by Sidney Jourard (1968). Jourard implies that the development of competence is an ongoing, liquid process; it is not a state of being or a goal that can ever be attained once and for all. However, the obvious drawback to not using this type of method is a quadrant A error (see Figure 1), that is, students with unlikely potential in terms of helper characteristics will be admitted into the Program.

Descriptively, an analogy may be drawn from the statistical concepts of Type I and Type II errors in hypothesis testing (Runyon and Haber, 1967). Raising the confidence level, or providing stricter screening methods decreases the Type I error (screening in poor potential student), and increases the

probability of a Type II error (screening out good potential students) and likewise, lowering the confidence level, or loosening screening practices, functions in just the opposite manner. A trade off is required and will be made based on each Program's unique needs.

As previously indicated, screening is the initial phase of quality control. Subsequent to screening, the process of retention comes into play. Retention within the present context is defined as the process of encouraging or attempting to maintain those students in a program who have good potential and discouraging, and at times dismissing those students from the program who show poor potential. The same type of illustration provided previously for screening may be used to describe potential outcomes of the retention process, as Figure 2 indicates. The possible outcomes appear analogous, retention is merely the second step along a time line from admission to graduation. Its temporal duration alone makes it the most potentially effective of the two quality assurance processes. This duration, from 2 to 4 years provides numerous opportunities to observe samples of the student's academic and professional-social skills. Thus, greater reliability can be assumed for a decision to retain or dismiss a student. This decreases the likelihood of errors in quadrants A and D, given clearly defined criteria.

Methods for decreasing these errors fall basically into two areas (1) Program Policy, and (2) Academic-Professional Learning Objectives. Having clearly specified program policies regarding grounds for dismissal not only serves the retention process, but also facilitates university-community agency relations when practica are involved.

At Pan American University Program policies regarding dismissal concentrate on student behavior at agency practicum sites. These policies are

specified in a handout, and additionally on a placement agreement, signed by the student. Basically, these policies cover the areas of confidentiality, and compliance with agency policy.

In academic and professional-social areas, methods of evaluating progress toward specific course objectives are essential. In academic areas evaluating knowledge, traditional paper and pencil tests, term papers and oral presentations are the methods used at Pan American University. The instructor's evaluation of the student's work serves as a basis for a course grade. In some instances, peer evaluation may additionally be used, particularly with regard to oral presentations.

Evaluation of professional-social development is the area providing most of the potential problems. As mentioned previously, at Pan American University, it is assumed that these skills and attitudes may be learned. Methods for teaching these skills involve didactic lecture, class discussion, role-playing and case simulation, videotaping and feedback, instructor modeling and coaching, peer feedback, and behavior rehearsal with agency practicum supervisor feedback.

Evaluation of the attainment of the helper characteristics or skills may be monitored using standard rating instruments developed by Carhuff or Ivey, depending on the orientation emphasized. Additionally, the GAIT mentioned previously, may be used as a method of assessing initial baseline performance levels of these skills.

The GAIT is a structured, small group exercise, involving 7 to 9 students, in which participants engage in five minute, two person interactions. Detailed written instructions of the procedure are provided for each participant. The entire procedure takes about 1½ hours. It provides a method of directly observing interpersonal skills in a simulated one on one interaction. It

can be used as intended with GAIT assessment procedures and materials, or the group procedure may be completed, even videotaped, and ratings made based on Carkhuff or Ivey helping skills. Peer and supervisor ratings may be used to assess a baseline for the occurence of the skills. Criteria can then be set based on individual needs, and attainment of criteria level performance measured under similar circumstances at a later date, such as at mid-term or at the end of the course. As skills become more complex, such as timing and integration of skills into a therapeutic process, measurement becomes increasingly difficult, eventually requiring almost total instructor judgement of effectiveness.

Agency practicum supervisors assist the retention process by formally and informally evaluating social-professional skills of students assigned to their agency. Their evaluations provide one criteria for practicum grades which are given. When changes in student performance are required, the faculty supervisor, in a supervisory session, indicates what changes need to occur and what the consequences of the student's options are. The student additionally evaluates his/her performance at the agency by completing a structured placement evaluation paper. One aspect of this paper includes the identification of student strengths and areas for improvement. And naturally, through supervisory sessions, the faculty indirectly, and at times directly, observe student professional-social skills.

Where a student's personal-social problems become apparent, the student is encouraged in a private conference to choose between using individual sessions for therapy with faculty, or referral to the University Counseling Center. On most occassions, this encouragement is sufficient to motivate the student. However, at times the student may resist the idea. When failure to seek counseling appears to jeopardize the student's potential effectiveness as a mental health worker, the Program faces a dilemma.

The Program may choose to dismiss the student and risk legal repercussions or ignore the problem, risking a quadrant A error (retaining a poor potential student), hoping for spontaneous recovery to occur. Typically, where a serious personal-social difficulty exists, measureable detrimental effects often will be seen in academic and professional-social areas, such that few decisions of this latter nature are required.

On the more positive side of the retention process, most students enter the program showing good potential for contribution. At Pan American University a number of methods are used to encourage these students. A developmental studies program in the Division of Health Related Professions offers students tutoring in math and science areas. The Learning Assistance Center at the University additionally provides training in effective study skills, and tutoring in other academic areas. In addition to encouraging use of the financial aid available, students with financial difficulties are encouraged to reduce their courseload and seek part-time employment in a human service agency which provides practicum experiences. In many instances, the employing supervisor will allow the student to be involved in those activities which are required for human service courses. In this way, the student may be employed and receive practicum credit simultaneously.

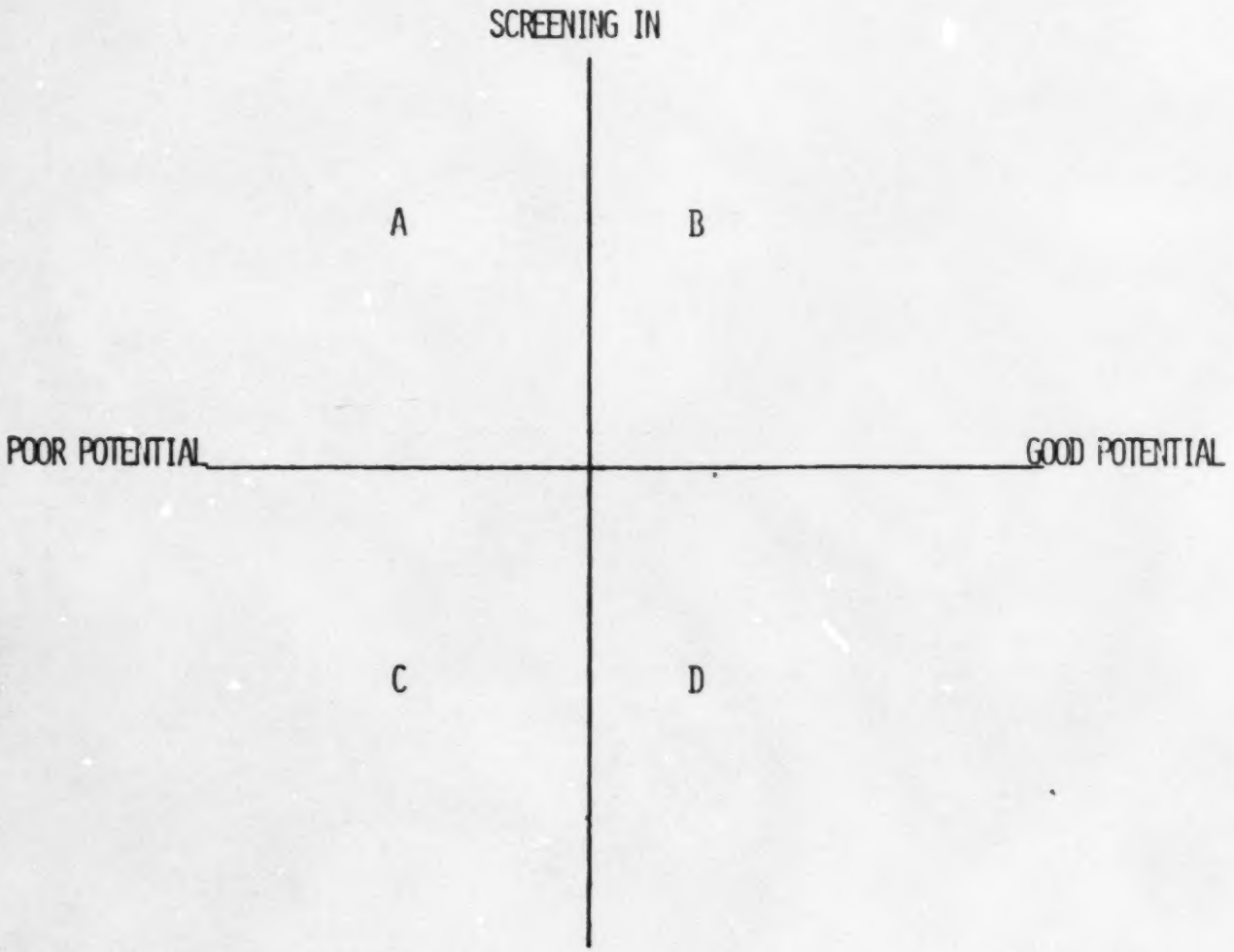
Additionally, the Program strongly supports the Human Service Student Organization as a source of peer support. Extracurricular activities, ranging from social parties to faculty-led group marathon sessions have been held. These activities enhance group cohesiveness and professional identity, and promote retention.

Intangible elements also exist in each Program, not easily specified, yet contributing to the process. Two areas which seem to reflect the idea of intangibles are that of student self-withdrawals, and faculty modeling. The student themselves are involved in making a number of choices regarding retention as they complete practicum work assignments. Some may feel the extra work required is not worth the effort, while others feel it contributes to the learning process. An important area of faculty modeling involves the effective use of professional social skills by faculty during agency interactions, and in the classroom. This model is important for instilling the concept of competency as an ongoing process.

By emphasizing the process of retention, a more positive approach to facilitating academic and professional student growth will occur and most students who graduate will contribute to the professions by becoming effective helpers and managers.

FIGURE 1

PERSPECTIVES ON THE SCREENING
OF HUMAN SERVICE STUDENTS



OUTCOMES

A = SCREENING IN STUDENTS WITH UNLIKELY POTENTIAL

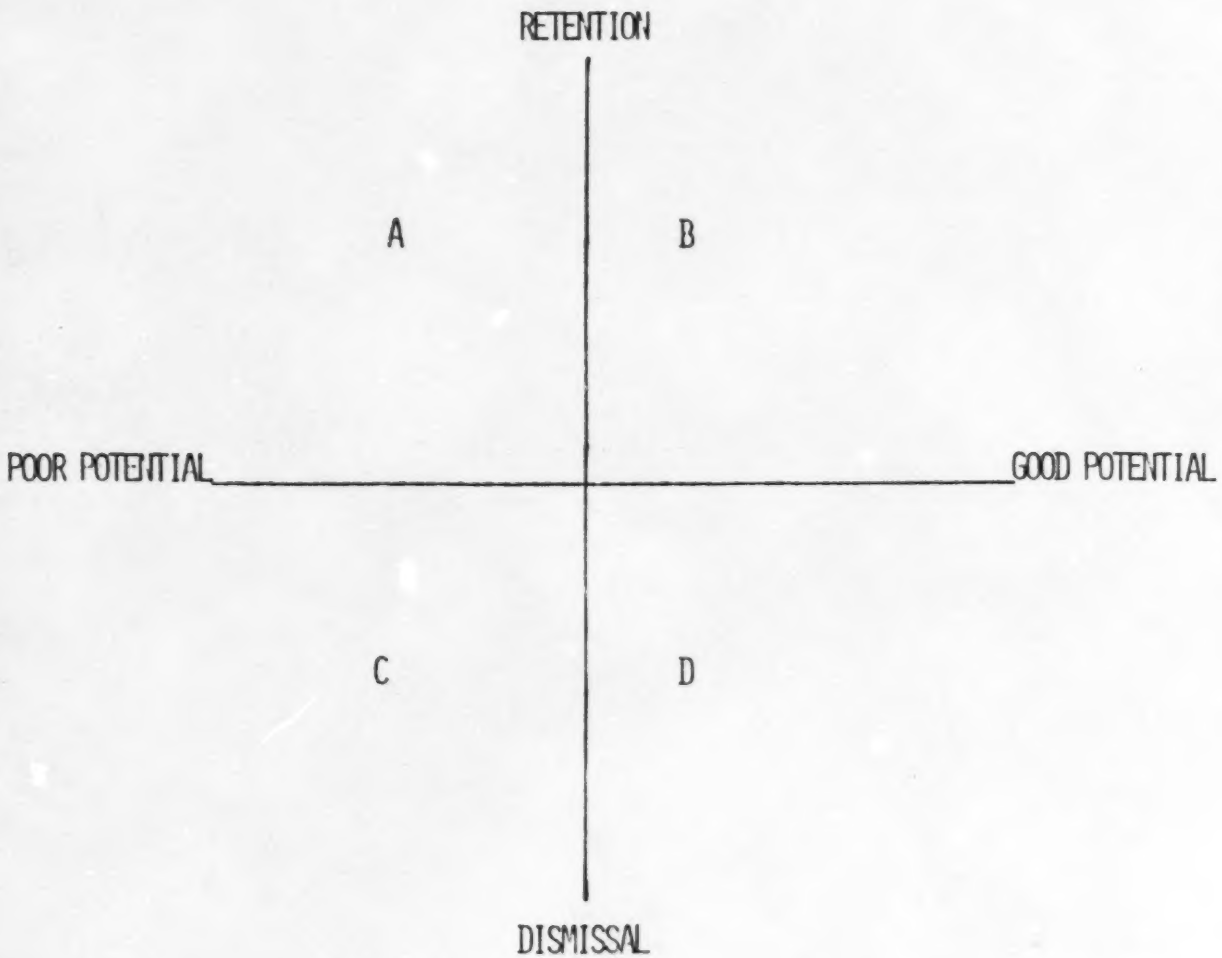
B = SCREENING IN STUDENTS WITH POTENTIAL

C = SCREENING OUT STUDENTS WITH UNLIKELY POTENTIAL

D = SCREENING OUT STUDENTS WITH POTENTIAL

FIGURE 2

PERSPECTIVES ON THE RETENTION OF
HUMAN SERVICE STUDENTS



OUTCOMES

A = ENCOURAGING STUDENTS WITH UNLIKELY POTENTIAL TO STAY

B = ENCOURAGING STUDENTS WITH POTENTIAL TO STAY

C = ENCOURAGING STUDENTS WITH UNLIKELY POTENTIAL TO LEAVE

D = ENCOURAGING STUDENTS WITH POTENTIAL TO LEAVE

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